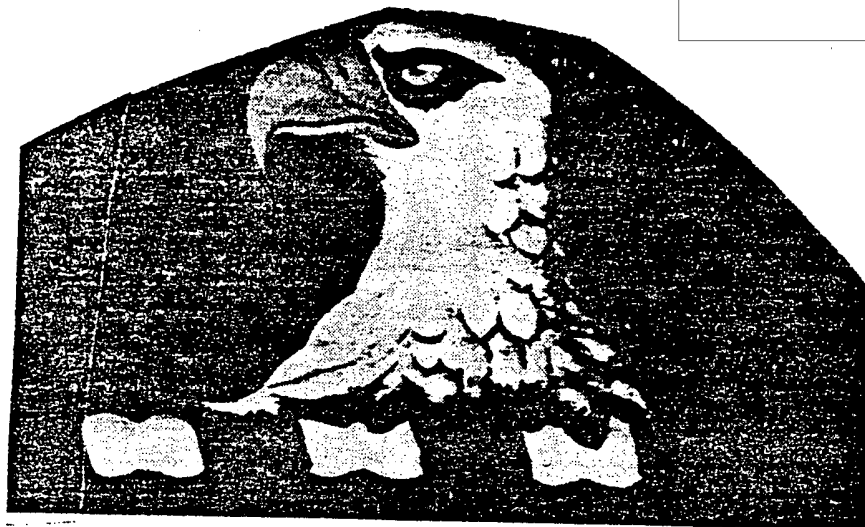


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Through the keyhole: A peek inside the CIA

By John Nassikas
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On Aug. 7, 1981, I drove a final time along Dolly Madison Boulevard and left behind two armed guards and 10 weeks of work for the Central Intelligence Agency. As one of 40 interns in a summer graduate-studies program sponsored by the CIA to assess potential full-time employees, I had a chance to look inside the most secret U.S. government agency. Some things I can tell you; some things, by law, I cannot.

I can tell you that at the end of every workday all typewriter ribbons must be locked up or destroyed. I can tell you how self-important I felt the first time I read a document stamped TOP SECRET. And about the smile that came across my face at the end of my first day when a secretary came into my office and asked whether I had any "classified trash."

I cannot tell you about my polygraph test. Or why a "syndrome approximation test" was canceled in the middle of a two-day period of physical and psychological examinations determining my fitness for the job. I can, however, tell you about the time the field man in charge of my background investigation erroneously came to my family's house in McLean, knocked at the front door, and said:

"I'd like to know what you think about your neighbor the Nassikas boy!"

"I think he's an exceptional young man," my sister replied.

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CIA. Everyone knows what the initials stand for; the rest they imagine. I, for one, was not sure what to expect when I first entered the CIA compound. I shared the common suspicion that a normal person with normal problems did not work there. I imagined that the typical employee was coldly professional, even emotionless, and led a life as charmed as James Bond's.

I knew that there were taboos. The CIA had warned me as a prospective employee that, once I had worked for the agency, I could never join the Peace Corps. And I knew that I could not be a practicing homosexual or become either an alcoholic or drug addict and expect to stay employed.

In the months before I applied to the agency's graduate-studies program, I heard rumor after crazy rumor: CIA people could not marry non-CIA people; CIA people were ultraconservatives, fascists, communists, closet radicals, you name it. I was told that agency employees were not permitted to study at Cal-Berkeley or the University of Michigan or to travel as tourists to the Soviet Union.

I was not surprised later to find out these rumors were false. Moreover, when I found out that the CIA hired people who drank alcohol, I simply nodded my head. But the CIA actually hired people who had smoked grass? Now that surprised me. (Needless to say, habitual users need not apply.)

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The first time I turned off Dolly Madison Boulevard onto the road leading to the CIA, I felt as if I were approaching Versailles. Flanking the road for 300 yards, tall trees stood like perfect sentries, and a regiment of daffodils marched in the shadow of the trees. At the guardhouse gate I pressed my CIA identification card against the windshield and was allowed to pass.

The card has no words on the front, only a photo and a few letters and numbers. From a distance, as your car is rolling up, the guards see the card and wave you on. If you don't have CIA identification, you had better have a good reason for wanting to drive past the gate. "I'm lost" or "Isn't this the road to Pizza Hut?" — favorites of local teen-agers looking for excitement on weekends — will not do. I know. As a teen-ager I tried them myself.

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